John Wesley and The First Great Awakening | FOSTER History & Collective Memory

At the beginning of the 18th century, England was mired in immense spiritual darkness and a moral quagmire. Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), a historian of the time, described the country's condition as "*Stomach well alive, soul extinct.*"

Deism was rampant, and a bland, philosophical morality was standard fare in the churches. Sir William Blackstone (1723-1780), an English jurist and politician best known for writing the *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, visited the church of every major clergyman in London, but "*did not hear a single discourse which had more Christianity in it than the writings of Cicero*", an eloquent Roman orator of the 1st century BC.

In most sermons he heard, it would have been impossible to tell just from listening whether the preacher was a follower of Christ, Mohammed, or Confucius! And during this time conformity with the Church of England was expected, and great efforts were made to persecute those who disagreed with the liturgical form of the service and it's beliefs, where it often only empowered human reason.

How is it possible that there are no symptoms of deterioration in an increasingly humanistic society?

Even nonconformists, whether dissident Protestants or Baptists, who disagreed with certain Church of England beliefs, suffered severe persecution over many years. They were excluded from all civilian and military appointments and could not enter the universities.

These Protestant dissenters felt that their faith was directed solely by God and that Christ was the sole leader of the Church. They resisted taking an oath of allegiance to the monarch and saw the Scriptures as the only rule of faith and conduct.

Mr. Richard Foster of Ossett (c. 1648-1730), "*a healthy and judicious Christian, strictly pious and devoted in his duty to God, and conscientious in his dealings with men,*" began meetings at his home and joined many other dissenters in 1706 who

were eager to welcome the faithful into their home as a gathering place despite recent prosecutions and imprisonments. "*He was very careful to instruct his family in the things of God, keeping faith and worship to God constantly in his home, as well as diligently attending to public ordinances. An extremely caring and understanding husband, a loving father, a good leader, and a helpful neighbor.*"

But on September 17, 1730, he died after suffering severe strangulation pains for a considerable time due to his faith, as recorded in the Reverend Thomas Dickenson's (1669-1743) book.

It's that morally, the country was becoming more and more decadent. Drunkenness was rampant; gambling was so extensive that one historian described England as "*one vast casino.*"

The public hangings were considered a real spectacle and the crowd witnessed these killings in a massive way. Parents would bring their children and a picnic out to the gallows to watch criminals die by hanging, and the young people were excited, just like a rock concert. People would drink too much and end up fighting, rolling around in the mud. With people rushing to get a good spot close to the gallows, these public spectacles were known irreverently as the "*hanging fair*", "*stretching*", or "*collar day,*" and these events had a festive atmosphere.

Vendors would show up early and set up their food and wares, much like a modern outdoor festival and they would make very good money at the event, selling food, drinks, and souvenirs related to the hanging. Sometimes they even sold promiscuous material.

Pamphlets would be distributed at a cost to the crowds which claimed to have printed inside them the dying speeches of those who were being hanged, known then as the "*Last Dying Speech*". They favored toward those who took their deaths with dignity, and seemed to despise those who showed fear or weakness, those who begged for mercy.

Newborns were exposed in the streets and 97% of the infant poor in the workhouses died as children. Bear baiting and cock fighting were accepted sports, and the slave trade brought material gain to many while further degrading their souls.

There were variants in which other animals were implicated that were harassed,

such as bulls, but also, on a curious occasion, a foal was especially harassed with a monkey tied to it's back: one viewer described that "*... with the monkey screaming, pulling the straps hanging from the colt's ears and neck, it was a lot of fun.*" The first attempts in England to end this entertainment were made by the Puritans, to no avail.

Bishop George Berkeley (1685-1753) wrote that morality and religion in Britain had collapsed "*to a degree that was never known in any Christian country.*" However, at the same time, George Whitefield (1714-1770), an Anglican clergyman and evangelist, was converted and in 1737 began preaching in London and Bristol.

In order to reach the many non-church-goers, Whitefield spoke in the open fields, and large crowds began gathering to hear the message of salvation. Whitefield became an itinerant preacher, or "*one of God's runabouts,*" as he called himself, traveling extensively in his wide-ranging ministry.

In his day, itinerant preachers were often criticized as interfering with or undermining the role of the parish priest, and Whitefield countered that many of the established clergy could not bring life to their people since they themselves were spiritually dead.

One such spiritually dead clergyman was John Wesley (1703-1791), who later became the evangelist who sparked a great spiritual awakening in the mid-18th century in England. But not without first going to Georgia with James Oglethorpe (1696-1785) to work as a missionary among the Indians.

He soon returned to England in despair and wrote, "*I went to America to convert the Indians; but oh who will convert me!*". On the ship going to Georgia, Wesley had met some Moravian immigrants and was impressed by their spiritual strength and joy in the Lord.

Back in England, as Wesley struggled with his own sinfulness and need of salvation, he received spiritual counsel from the Moravian Peter Boehler (1712-1775).

On May 24, 1738, during a meeting at Aldersgate, Wesley experienced God's saving grace and wrote:

> "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone

> for salvation; and an assurance was given to me that he had taken away my sins."

The love of Jesus Christ lit up Wesley's heart and he knew he couldn't keep quiet. There had to be some way to reach the millions of people who would never walk through the door of a church. Initially, Wesley was convinced that the Gospel could only be preached within the structure of a church. But with so few people attending church services, he was forced to consider other options and learned from George Whitefield (1714-1770) the importance of preaching outdoors to reach the crowds.

He found a high point on the outskirts of the city and began preaching to those who would listen. A crowd of three, five, even ten thousand people gathered. Many of them were touched by God and their spiritual state awakened.

Wesley rediscovered what the church of his day had forgotten: prayer results in the power of God, and he called prayer the most important means of drawing closer to God. Despite this, he was unwelcome in many of the established churches in England and was looked down upon as one of the contemptible religious "*enthusiasts.*" Maybe this was a blessing in disguise, as it permitted him to minister to the poor in prisons, hospitals, workhouses, and at the mine pit heads.

Excessive taunts, verbal abuse, and even occasional physical violence could not deter Wesley, who traveled more than 250,000 miles in the cause of the Gospel and in his preaching spoke continually of Christ emphasizing repentance, faith and holiness. He said that repentance was like the porch of religion; conviction of sin always came before faith. Faith was the door of religion.

Faith was "*not only to believe that the Holy Scriptures and the articles of our faith are true, but also to have a sure trust and confidence to be saved from everlasting damnation through Christ.*" Holiness was religion itself, "*To love God with all our heart, and, our neighbor as ourselves, and in that love abstain from all evil and do all possible good to all men.*"

As Wesley preached, multitudes responded. He noted in his journal that "*the Word of God ran as fire among the stubble; it was glorified more and more and multitudes crying out: What must I do to be saved?*" and afterwards witnessing, "*By grace we are saved through faith.*"

In July 1772, he visited the new chapel of his friend the Reverend Titus Knight (1719-1793) and Benjamin Dickenson (1719-1798), who founded it that same year and later spread the gospel in Halifax.

When John Wesley (1703-1791) visited this congregation, he wrote:

> My old friend, Titus Knight, offered me the use of his new meeting, larger than Dr Taylor's (1694-1761) at Norwich, and finished with the utmost elegance; but I judged more people would attend in the open air, so I preached in the cow market to a huge multitude.

Square Independent Chapel, which was the largest non-conformist place of worship in England, had not been enough to contain the large crowd that was eager to hear God's Word when Wesley preached in the open air. During this time the society witnessed a great spiritual awakening and the fields were ready for the great harvest.

It should be noted that Titus Knight (1719-1793), at the instigation of John Wesley (1703-1791), became a preacher and schoolmaster and later preached at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London.

Benjamin Dickenson (1719-1798) was also heavily influenced by Wesley's teachings in 1772 and continued to preach in and around Halifax. Like his mother Hannah Foster (1674-1763) and father, the Reverend Thomas Dickenson (1669-1743), he contributed significantly to the spread of the Gospel and the construction of the chapel for many years.

His good grandfather Richard Foster (c. 1648-1730) was taken to the grave in 1730 after suffering severe strangulation pains due to his faith, but not before giving, but not before giving "*a good example and serious and pious instructions, raising many fervent prayers to God for his descendants, for his posterity.*"

First Great Awakening

The revival in the life of John Wesley (1703-1791) affected not only souls but society, which soon began to see the favorable consequences of these massive

conversions.

The fervent prayers of many men of faith who lived their consecrated lives led God to pour out his mercy on the next generations. And it was not in vain, the adverse situations they had to go through and the great dedication they sowed in their offspring.

Thomas Dickenson (1669-1743), "*He lived godly and died seeking the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ.*"

Richard Foster (c. 1648-1730), "*He feared God from his youth and over many, surpassed many others in gifts and knowledge, and God honored him by making him eminent in grace and usefulness as well*." These preachers also distributed printed sermons and several manuscripts are preserved that convey a fervent, loving and devoted spirit.

In John Wesley's (1703-1791) day, the Church of England did not connect with the real life of ordinary people and he chose to speak simply so that everyone could hear the gospel and understand it. Even during his travels, Wesley found that unsaved people more easily connected to the Gospel when it came from their native culture, since generally the music in religious services was Latin chants and did not fully connect with ordinary people.

Wesley wrote numerous sermons, tracts, and books that were distributed to a wide audience to advance the great spiritual awakening by pioneering the monthly magazine and editing Christian Living, a selection of theological and devotional literature for lay people. Thousands of people who had never heard him speak came to know Christ through his writings.

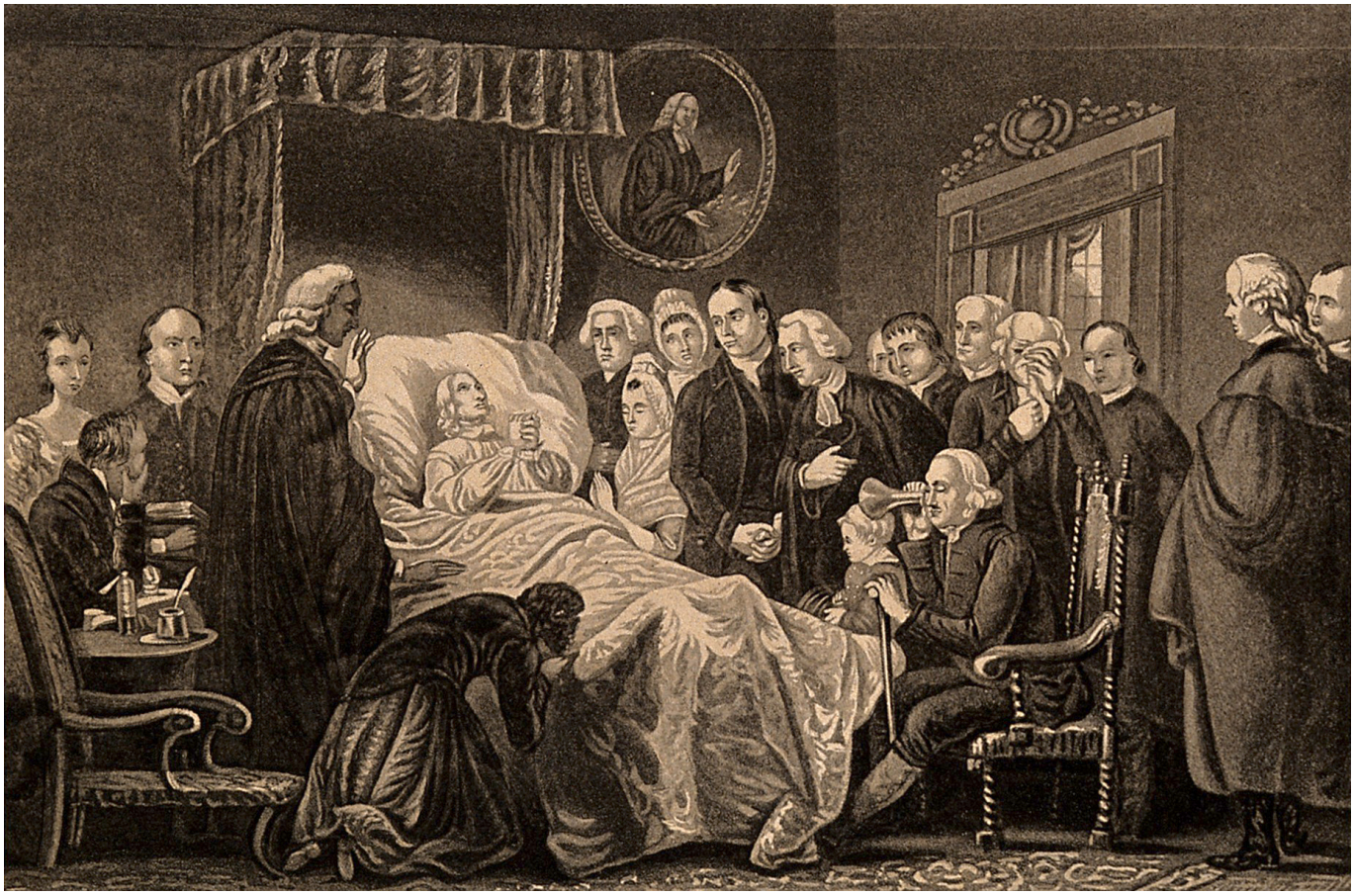
John Wesley used all the profits from his literary works for charitable purposes and encouraged Christians to actively participate in social reform. He himself spoke out strongly against the slave trade and encouraged William Wilberforce (1759-1833) in his crusade against slavery.

Numerous agencies promoting Christian work emerged as a result of the 18th century revival in England. Hospitals and schools multiplied. Anti-slavery societies, prison reform groups, and aid agencies for the poor were started. Numerous missionary societies were formed; the Society of Religious Treatise was organized; and the British and Foreign Bible Society was established.

The great spiritual awakening crossed denominational lines and touched all classes

of society and England itself was transformed by revival.

In 1928 Archbishop Randall Thomas Davidson (1848-1930) wrote that "*Wesley practically changed the outlook and even the character of the English nation,*" and some historians have maintained that the revival so altered the course of English history that it probably saved England from the kind of revolution that took place in France at the end of the 18th century.



Towards the end of his life, John Wesley's health deteriorated dramatically and he finally died on March 2, 1791, at the age of 87. As he lay dying, his friends gathered around him, Wesley grasped their hands and said repeatedly, "Farewell, farewell." At the end, he said, "The best of all is, God is with us", lifted his arms and raised his feeble voice again, repeating the words, "The best of all is, God is with us."

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